

Prepared Statement By

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**U.S.D.A. 2007 Farm Bill Listening Session
with The Honorable Mike Johanns,
U.S. Secretary of Agriculture**

**September 27, 2005
Orlando, Florida**

Good afternoon Secretary Johanns and other platform guests. I am Charles Hall, Executive Director of the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association. Our association represents over 300 growers and packers of fruit and vegetable. In Georgia fruit and vegetable production is the number two agricultural commodity behind poultry. We are a diversified specialty crop state producing a variety of produce from fruit such as blueberries, strawberries and peaches to over 20 different vegetables including carrots, tomatoes, melons, greens and our internationally recognized Vidalia onions. In 2004 the farm gate value of Georgia's fruit and vegetable industry was more that \$830 million dollars.

Mr. Secretary, we thank you for taking your time to schedule and attend this session. By holding this meeting in conjunction with the Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association's 62nd annual convention, we know that you recognize the important role of fruit and vegetables in American agriculture.

The dynamics of American agriculture is changing. We look forward to the dialogue our nation will engage in over the next two years as we find ways in which American growers can continue to bring to market some of the best produce in the world.

It is also important to recognize the nutritional value of fruit and vegetables and their role in fighting obesity. The United State government has taken a very high profile position, and rightfully so, in promoting healthy eating habits by the release of the U.S.D.A. Food Pyramid and nutritional guidelines. We commend you and your staff for the promotional efforts and informational web pages U.S.D.A. has developed to help Americans learn how to eat healthy.

The goal of eating healthier foods and fighting the obesity epidemic is certainly worthy and needed. However, when we look at these guidelines and how U.S. farm policy is formulated, and how funds are allocated, there is clearly a disconnect between what is recommended for consumer consumption and how we fund agriculture in this country. Would it not make more sense to look to the Food Pyramid as a guideline for research, promotion and support of United States agricultural production.....in order to make us a healthier nation? This direction would move our nation to improved nutrition and a better quality of life.

Over the years, Georgia fruit and vegetable growers have gone through tremendous changes in an effort to remain profitable, satisfy consumer demands, adapt to new technology and compete in an ever growing international market place. Today growers are faced with some of the most stringent economic conditions and regulatory challenges they have ever seen. We look to the 2007 Farm Bill to help address some of these issues for our industry.

Today I want to highlight three of these issues, which I am sure we will have the opportunity to discuss in more detail as the Farm Bill dialogue continues into 2007.

1. Research

Research serves as both a foundation and a catalyst for growth in the advancement of any industry. Federal investment in agricultural research dedicated to the economic vitality and long-term viability of United States specialty crops has been extremely limited. Specialty crops and their research needs are unique and important. These crops are typically characterized by high production input costs, unique market challenges, and are a significant source of essential nutrients required for good health.

The specialty crop industry also faces a range of challenges in meeting more stringent water quality and water conservation goals, and new air pollution control requirements. With dramatic reductions in Cooperative Extension staff and research personnel, support for applied specialty crop research has been significantly curtailed. Farmers must receive assistance from U.S.D.A. researchers to find practical production solutions.

Federal investments in research for specialty crop production, processing, marketing, and consumption which influence public access to these vital commodities must be re-

emphasized in the next farm bill. Research investments in agriculture should be allocated to reflect the national importance of these products to the American diet. In plain terms, over 50% of the Food Pyramid and nutritional guidelines is provided by fruit and vegetables, we believe 50% of the research funding in U.S.D.A. should reflect this same importance.

2. **Nutrition**

The need for increasing the investment in federal nutrition funding cannot be overstated. The 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines call for Americans to consume from 5-to-13 servings a day of fruit and vegetables. As previously mentioned, over 50% of the Food Pyramid is highlighted as fruits and vegetables. As new agricultural policy is developed in 2007, nutrition assistance programs should support incentives and programs that help Americans reach these national health goals and ultimately reduce health care costs. One excellent example of this is the USDA Fruit and Vegetable Snack Program. We strongly support the expansion of this program into all 50 states and the development of similar fruit and vegetable consumption programs which benefit our nation.

3. **Payment Limitations**

In the U.S.D.A. disaster payment model, and in other conservation program models, the basic premise is 'one size fits all'. However, we know that not all farms are the same. Specialty crop producers have tremendously higher input cost for production than our 'traditional crop' brothers. It is not unreasonable for a tomato grower in Georgia or Florida to have over \$5,000 of production costs before the first fruit is harvested. However, when a disaster occurs our growers are paid based on the same \$80,000 payment limit as a cotton or corn producer. The math is simple... a tomato or vegetable grower with \$5,000 per acre cost and a \$80,000 limit will only recover their costs for 16 acres of crop; whereas, a cotton farmer with \$500 per acre costs will

recover their costs for 160 acres. Future U.S. farm policy must account for cost of production differentials.....agriculture is not a 'one size fits all' program.

Several months ago, eighteen produce associations from across the United States came together to begin the process of developing an industry policy position as the dialogue for the 2007 Farm

Bill is initiated. As a member of this Farm Bill Working Group, I believe we will develop the comprehensive recommendations that is needed for the next farm bill for the produce industry. I have touched on some of the recommendations that Georgia growers believe to be critically important in this debate. It is our association's hope as the 2007 farm policy is developed the needs and priorities of the produce industry will be addressed.

Mr. Secretary, your assistance is paramount in assuring the U.S. specialty crop industry remains competitive, through proper support of research, nutrition, promotion and conservation efforts. The long term future of the U.S. food supply depends on it.

Thank you again for allowing our Georgia growers this opportunity to participate.

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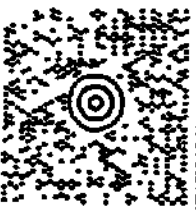
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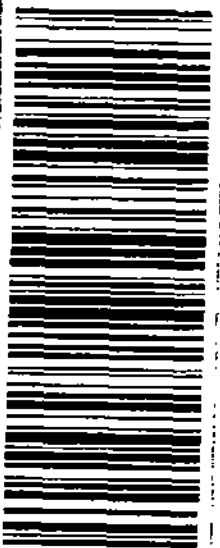


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